

DALE HARNEY AND The Magic Palace

by David Ben

Most magicians can point to a performer, trick or performance that ignited their interest in magic. More often than not, the spark is generational. In the 1920s, it may have been ignited by Thurston. The next generation may have been inspired by Blackstone. In the 1950s and 60s, it could have been a performer on the *Ed Sullivan Show*; or Mark Wilson or Dai Vernon. For many, of course, the 1970s was the era of Doug Henning. For me, and a lot of magicians who came of age in the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly in Canada, that magician was Dale Harney.

Dale was born in Edmonton, Alberta, April 28, 1945. He became interested in magic at the age of ten, after watching the television series Robin Hood. While most of his friends imagined themselves as the title character, Dale wanted to be Merlin, the Magician. He developed his understanding of sleight-of-hand magic, though, chiefly from performers such as Al Wheatley, John Shirley, and Channing Pollock (who he saw on the *Ed Sullivan Show*). Pollock became his idol.

In his teens, Dale met a local magician—Bob Bell—in Edmonton. Originally from England, Bell was both knowledgeable and talented. More importantly, he loved magic, and his passion was contagious. Dale, now twelve years old, visited Bell most Sundays, and learned a great deal from him. Dale focused primarily on stage magic. Close up magic—par-



ticularly when it came to generating income—was just coming into vogue.

After graduating from high school, Dale attended the University of Alberta. He enrolled in the drama department with the expectation that if all else failed, he would become a drama teacher. He augmented his formal studies with real-world performing experience. He performed all manner and make of show, from shopping centers to fair grounds. He also paid for his university education by performing and recording a children's daily TV show called *Mr. Magic*, which later became *The Magic Den*. There were, literally, hundreds of hours of footage recorded over the course of the series. Dale was in his mid-teens at the time, and yet the children in the audience were not much younger—eleven and twelve years old. "The performer and his audience were really of the same generation!" muses Dale when he recalls the show.

Dale also met Micky Hades around that time. Hades was a magic dealer, a publisher, a collector, and builder of illusions. He was, in short, an incredible resource for a budding professional. Hades became Dale's new magical mentor, and took on the challenge of managing Dale's career. Dale was eighteen and the pair worked together for close to two years. They then parted company amicably; Dale had ambitions beyond Micky's network of contacts.

It was around this time that Dale developed one of his signature trademarks, wearing black gloves. As a youth, having seen footage of Cardini performing split fans while wearing white gloves, Dale put in the requisite hours to master the technique. He discovered, however, while performing in grandstand shows at various fairs, with the audience often tiered well away from the stage, that cards were not quite visible against the white gloves. The solution was simple: he would wear black gloves so that when each card appeared, it would pop into view. Dale used a black felt tipped marker to mask the edges of the cards to further assist with the illusion.

Dale soon met Sheila Ingram, and she became his partner on stage and off. The two embarked on a career as travelling show people. Dale recalls how the pair came together: "In hindsight, it was an odd start to a relationship. I was playing a nightclub, and Sheila was in the audience - heckling me!"

But the long travel days—particularly in Canada—between dates, and the rigors of repeatedly performing one-night gigs eventually took its toll. Near the end of one particularly grueling stretch, the twenty-seventh night of twenty-eight one-nighters, in a "flea-bag hotel," Sheila stood up from the bed and declared she couldn't do it any more. Dale tried to coax her back to bed, but she was adamant. She'd had enough. It was

hard to argue with her; by this time they also had a toddler son, Shane, on the road with them. It was simply too much to juggle. Shelia wanted to establish roots and leave show business behind.

To ease the transition, she came up with a plan. She knew exactly who could take her place: Lynda Lopushinsky. Lynda had been involved with show business since childhood. An accomplished singer and pianist, Lynda also had stage presence. Shelia suggested that they speak with her and, if everyone agreed, she could teach Lynda her role in the act. The deed was done. Dale and Shelia would eventually divorce, and Lynda became his new partner—again, both on stage and off.

Lynda and Dale embarked on a life together, back on the road, spending the bulk of the 1970s and 80s touring a two-hour show in Canada, and appearing on variety shows, both live and on television, in the United States. They spent over three years—eleven months of each year on the road—performing magic with the Shrine Circus. He was not only the first-ever Canadian act to ever tour three consecutive years with the Shrine Circus, but Dale was also the first North American performer to ever use all three rings during one act.

A magic enthusiast as much as a professional, Dale was constantly updating his material. He did everything from straightjacket escapes suspended from block and tackle, to the Mis-Made Girl illusion, to the Knight's Tour, to the Water Torture Cell. He rounded out his shows with card and billiard ball manipulations and dove work.

Dale also performed memory acts. For one of them, The World Airline Distance Mileage Chart, Dale developed an elaborate mnemonic system with over 1,200 combinations. It was a big hit in nightclubs. Charts were distributed on the nightclub tables. Any time during the evening, audience members would challenge him to tell them the flying distance between two cities and, of course, Dale would respond with the correct mileage. The hook? If he got it wrong, the patron would receive a free drink on the house. Dale later discovered to his own surprise, the power of his system: "You could give me a city and mileage, and I could name the city you were travelling to; or, if you gave me the mileage you were flying, I could correctly name the to and fro cities!"

Dale's version of the Water Torture Cell was as creative as it was baffling. First, the water escape would be performed "dry", that is, the person who emerged from the tank would be dry rather than wet. He accomplished this by having the person who escaped—initially himself, and then in later years, his partner Lynda—in a sack that was then lowered into the tank of water. Second, after padlocks secured the top of the tank, glasses filled with champagne were placed on top of the lid.




reat Falls
Falls, Montana, Thursday, July 7, 1977
TRIB
B4
The Edmonton J
Dale, Lynda a magic couple
Edmonton natives bring world-class tricks to AgriCom
Illusions for sale
Mickey Hades has a store full of tricks and props.
Route
agic world are changing
GIC: An art form that's undergoing a renaissance
GUCCI OF POLAND
Please see Calendar/B5



The curtain was then drawn around the cabinet. Dale or Lynda would eventually emerge absolutely dry, with every lock in place, and nary a drop of the bubbly missing from the glasses. In 1984, Lynda was nominated for an ACTRA award, the Canadian equivalent of the Emmy Award, for her performance. (She lost to Anne Murray.)

The most successful performers wear many hats, and perhaps no hat is more important than that of entrepreneur. It doesn't take long for a performer, particularly one who does a full evening show, to become a producer, the person who organizes and mounts the production. So, having toured extensively, and having performed on numerous television variety shows, Dale thought it was high time to pitch a television network on his own weekly television show—*The Magic Palace*.

Dale pitched his program, a weekly half-hour television program of magic, to a Calgary television station, one that was part of the Global

Television Network. Global Television started in 1974 as the first new television network in Canada in years. A hodge-podge of local stations, it went bankrupt within thirty days. Allan Slaight, lifelong magic enthusiast (and, at that time, budding broadcasting entrepreneur) took it out of bankruptcy, and turned the fortunes of the network around. He sold his interest in the network in the mid-seventies to his partners.

The program was pitched as a co-production. Dale would assemble the talent and host the show. Each episode featured two guest artists and Dale. In turn, the station would provide the crew and pay the performers' fees. Each act was given $1,200 for appearing on the program on a "buy-out," plus travel to and accommodation in Calgary for the taping.

This all occurred in an era before the use of mobile phones and emails. So Dale, who was out on the road touring, as usual, telephoned the station every few weeks to find out if any decision had been made regarding his pitch. Much to surprise, while Dale was in Chicago, the station said that it was a go. Not only was it a go, they also wanted to begin shooting in two months.

There was a lot to organize. And with Dale on the road, he needed help. While in Chicago, Dale turned to John Shirley. Dale had first seen Shirley on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. In the intervening years Shirley became a talent agent in Chicago. It was settled; Dale engaged Shirley to be the talent coordinator for *The Magic Palace*. In addition, Shirley negotiated all of the fees with the individual performers.

The production process was always the same. The magicians were flown to Calgary and accommodated at the International Hotel. Dale and Lynda would greet the performers at the hotel and, along with the director, have the performer run through his act so that they could discuss how it should be shot for television. When the performer required an assistant, Lynda would play the part. She would learn what was required (especially the blocking) from the performer, right there and then in the hotel room.

At the time, videotapes were massive reels and quite expensive. Video was also extremely difficult and time consuming to edit. So the goal would be to record each performance just once, and have those performances presented in front of a live, studio audience. Even though Dale had a director on board, more often than not he would be the *de facto* director. He was acutely aware of angle requirements for filming magic for television and when, or when it wasn't, advisable to cut to another camera angle in order to preserve the integrity of the effect for both the performer and the audience.

After the first year, a new talent co-ordinator came on board: John Thompson. It was the first time Thompson had served any production

in this manner. Thankfully, armed with an encyclopedic knowledge of show business, and the contacts to match, he was a perfect choice for the job. In particular, John had a great relationship with the resident performers at the Magic Castle, and he brought them in to Calgary with regularity to tape the *The Magic Palace*.

The roster of artists who appeared on the show represents a Who's Who of magicians of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, many of whom are regarded as past masters, or today's living legends. They include, (alphabetically) Allan Ackerman, Don Alan, Steve Baker, Pete Biro, Harry Blackstone Jr., Mike Caldwell, Mike Caveney, Bruce Cervon, Bill Chaudet, Daniel Cross, Daryl, Bob Downey, Ricky Dunn, Glenn Falkenstein (and Francis Willard), Karrell Fox, Al Goshman, Paul Harris, Bob Higa, Ricky Jay, George Johnstone, Chuck Jones, Mark Kalin & Lynda, Kirk Kirkham, Jules Lenier, Nick Lewin, Jay Marshall, Max Maven, Billy McComb, Charlie Miller, Harry Monti, Martin Nash, Earl Nelson, Patrick Page, Peter Pit, Jack Pyle, Marvin Roy, Dale Salwak, Ron Wilson, Dick and Diana Zimmerman, and many others. John Shirley also performed, as did Johnny Thompson. Thompson, in particular, performed numerous sets as both himself and as the Great Tomsoni.

Dale also performed on each show, acting as the host and bridge between acts. His magic was dictated by the circumstances. He literally posted cue cards on a corkboard, one for each act, listing what the act performed. He would then rearrange the cards, pairing performers for each show like he was pairing fine wine with individual courses. He would also factor in what was required to complete the show. Although his own performance repertoire was quite broad, he often had to learn a new effect for each new show.

Sometimes, particularly with new material, mistakes would creep in—the kind of mistake that a television director would have no hesitation to include, as stopping to reshoot could throw off a tight production schedule. As such, when Dale knew something was not up to his standards, he used a creative technique to ensure that the cameras would stop, and that the piece would be reshot. How? He would simply turn his head slightly away from the audience and swear into his microphone. The live audience would not hear the expletive, but the audio engineer sure did. The recording immediately stopped in order to reshoot the trick and take out the offending word, thus giving Dale second chance to perform the piece perfectly. It is a testament to Harney's professionalism that he seldom had to resort to this ruse.

Most importantly, the show was a hit. Over ninety-six half-hour episodes were filmed, and it wasn't the only series Dale had in production at the

time. He was also hard at work on *Lynsky and Company*, a children's show featuring Dale performing magic, Lynda singing and playing a couple of songs, and a mascot—Ralph, the dog—that got in the way of everything. Some 130 half-hour episodes of this program were also recorded. So, at peak production, Dale and Lynda would shoot three *Lynsky and Company* programs in the morning, meet the guest performers of *The Magic Palace* in the afternoon, work through the transitions, and then tape a *Magic Palace* episode that evening in front of the live audience.

A grueling schedule takes its toll on even the most steadfast of troupers. Like Sheila before her, Lynda was nearing the end of her rope. Dale convinced the studio that they needed a break. Dale's idea of a break, however, was very different from Lynda's. Dale contacted an agent in Los Angeles, and got them booked for a month's run in Hawaii. Although Lynda has never forgiven Dale for making it a working vacation—two shows a day, three on Saturday—it did do the trick, and the couple have remained unfaltering through thick and thin, a pillar of support and strength for each other.

But, after ninety-six episodes, *The Magic Palace* had run its course. Unfortunately, the master tapes of all these performances were reused for other programming, a common practice at the time. Videotape was so expensive that studios would simply reuse the same tape to record new programs, taping over the previous show, in order to save money. Thankfully though, there are magic enthusiasts and collectors.

Although he no longer owned Global Television at the time *The Magic Palace* was aired, television executives knew of Slaight's love of magic, and they used to send him compilations on VHS tapes of many of the episodes. Slaight gave those tapes, along with his extensive video archive (which also included magic programs recorded off the television by his great friend P. Howard Lyons of *Ibidem* fame) to Magicana. So, between Slaight's footage of *The Magic Palace*, the tapes compiled by P. Howard Lyons and Sid Lorraine (part of my own collection), and most recently, those by David Sutherland and Gerry Frenette of Toronto, Magicana is pleased to present a searchable, online video archive of much of the magic that was performed on *The Magic Palace*.

It represents an extraordinary snapshot into the magic and personality of many of our most esteemed practitioners. You can now view most of these performances at **WWW.MAGICANA.COM/MAGICPALACE**. Some of my favourite footage includes performances by Ron Wilson and Charlie Miller. Both performers did their core repertoire on the show. I was also thrilled to see Jules Lenier perform what must have been his Magic Castle set, and Johnny Thompson with the inaugural performance of the Gambler's Ballad. The compilation, however, is not complete, and we invite any readers who have their own home copies of the show to contact us so that we can add additional footage to this retrospective.

After *The Magic Palace*, Dale and Lynda continued with live performances, either with their two-hour show, or as part of various variety shows. They also did an extraordinary amount of television work. When looking back, Dale recalls that the couple performed in and/or produced seven different local and syndicated series. And, with countless other guest appearances and telethons, Dale jokes that he did so much television, he'd stop at a red light and say, "Welcome back to the show!"

As the 90s approached, circumstances dictated that they take a break from touring. The cost of touring, both economically and emotionally, had truly mounted and, more significantly, there were concerns at home. Lynda's father had been diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease, and Dale and Lynda abandoned life on the road in order to care for him. The two also decided to parlay their production experience and embarked on a new career. They set up a film production company that specialized in corporate messaging. And, in a parallel business, they also became literary agents for books and screenplays.

The latter business developed because, having taped scores of television programs, they came into contact with dozens of writers, each of whom confessed to having a unpublished screenplay or novel that they needed help selling. Dale was a seasoned salesman, and enjoyed the process of helping writers hone their scripts for the commercial market, and was able to place those works with studios or publishers. That was the couple's primary business until the Writer's Strike in 2007-2008, which changed the way that scripts were sold, and studios produced work.

The only way one can survive in show business is to adapt. After weathering the recession of 2008 and, more significantly, partial paralysis that doctors believe resulted from injuries sustained from doing the upside straight-jacket escape years earlier, Dale is back on his feet, producing corporate videos, and pitching plays, books, and exhibitions.

In June of 2015, he attended his first magic conference in years, 31 Faces North in Toronto, where he was reunited with some of the performers—Mike Caveney, Max Maven and, most significantly, Johnny Thompson—who had appeared on *The Magic Palace*. Delegates also got a taste of some of the magic that was performed on his shows.

Seeing him on screen, and then in person, made me realize that the best performers, the ones that inspire, are not just true to themselves on stage and off, but also to the art that they love so much. That's Dale. That's magic.